

## ALTERNATIVE A: LOWER MISSISSIPPI DELTA HERITAGE TOURISM INITIATIVE

Heritage tourism is one of the fastest growing segments of the nation's tourism industry and is projected to continue growing well into the 21st century. This alternative would establish the Lower Mississippi Delta Heritage Partnership to coordinate, plan, fund, and implement a regional tourism strategy for the Delta. Drawing on recommendations from the Lower Mississippi Delta Development Commission this heritage partnership would promote and market the Lower Mississippi Delta as a major travel destination, focusing on the natural, cultural, and historical heritage of the region.

### VISITOR EXPERIENCE

The following 10 concepts, drawn from the stories of the Delta and presented earlier in the document, form the basis of the visitor experience and interpretation for this heritage tourism initiative.

Comprehensive Concept: Stories of the Delta  
1) Natural Resources — The Heart of the Delta  
2) Transforming the Mississippi River: Manipulating the Mississippi River System to Facilitate Navigation and Manage Flood Flows  
3) New Madrid Earthquakes/ Seismic Zone  
4) The People: Encountering the Cultural Diversity of the Lower Mississippi Delta Region  
5) Native American Heritage in the Delta  
6) African-American Heritage in the Delta  
7) The Civil War in the Lower Mississippi Delta  
8) Delta Blues Commemorative Area  
9) Delta Agriculture

By focusing on these concepts visitors would

- encounter, understand, and appreciate the varied cultural heritages of the Delta
- learn of the events or opportunities that delivered such a diversity of peoples to the region, of the fluidity with which the cultures sometimes mingled, and the conflicts

and accommodations that accompanied such a mingling of diverse cultures

- discover the tangible expressions of the Delta's many cultural influences, i.e. architecture, art, literature, music, festivals, institutions, religions, and traditional ceremonies
- observe and understand the geophysical transformation and the human manipulation of the Mississippi River system and the lower Delta over the centuries
- discover the abundant and varied natural resources of the Mississippi River system and their importance to the ecological health and well being of systems well beyond the Delta region
- explore the river towns that arose along the banks of the Mississippi River system and reflect both the evolution of transportation along the river and the economic impact of those changes over time.
- understand and appreciate the connection between the river system and the rise of agriculture in the Delta
- understand the role of Delta agriculture in the social, labor, and economic systems in the Delta and the nation

### ORIENTATION/INFORMATION

The heritage partnership would utilize existing tourist information centers along the primary highway systems to create an orientation/information network in the Delta. The centers would provide information on sites, museums, cultural centers, and communities to visit as well as brochures for driving, biking, and hiking tours. In addition, the centers would provide information on lodging and food services available in the Delta. An up-to-date

calendar of events would be distributed for upcoming festivals, celebrations, and other events in the Delta.

The heritage partnership would coordinate the distribution of materials in the Delta to ensure that visitors receive an orientation to the entire Delta, regardless of which tourist information center they visit. Each tourist information center would offer information on all nine concepts would direct travelers to museums, cultural centers, historic sites, or natural resource sites throughout the Delta. A variety of media would be used to disseminate information on the 10 concepts, including interactive computer kiosks, maps, brochures, and video and audio tapes.

In addition to tourist information centers, signs installed at key locations could direct visitors and residents to sites of interest throughout the Delta. A travelers low-frequency radio network might be installed at gateway locations around the Delta.

## **INTERPRETATION AND EDUCATION**

### **Interpretation**

An integrated system of programs, facilities, sites, exhibits, publications, videos, and Internet sites that present and interpret the nine concepts listed above would be integral to the heritage partnerships work in developing interpretive programs for the Delta. The stories of the Delta and the concepts that reflect them would be presented within the context of the entire region. Emphasis would be placed on telling aspects of all 10 concepts and interpreting the interconnectedness of all the stories of the Delta.

It is envisioned that once visitors received information at one of the tourist information centers, they would then drive, bike, hike, or boat to existing interpretive or cultural centers that focus on one or more of the seven concepts presented in this study. Along the way visitors would experience the Delta landscape — along levees and historic trails and roads, through towns and cities, and along

the greatest landscape feature of all — the Mississippi River.

A transportation system comprised of existing roads, rivers, potential abandoned railroad right-of-ways, and hiking trails could be developed, packaged, and marketed for the heritage area.

### **Education**

The heritage partnership would coordinate and implement development of educational programs related to the stories of the Delta. Vital to visitors' understanding and appreciating the complex heritage of the Delta is Delta residents' understanding and appreciating the importance of their own heritage. Children and adults alike interact with visitors on a daily basis and are key interpreters of the region's history and heritage. Educating children early in their school years and holding workshops for adults at community centers and area schools and colleges will help foster a sense of pride and ownership in the stories and resources of the Delta for the people for whom the Delta is home.

An educational program could be developed that would provide opportunities for all levels of education. The curriculum could be designed to be used in a variety of ways. It might be used as the framework for a thematic, cross curricular unit on Delta heritage. Individual lessons might be used to tie with other areas of classroom study; e.g., geography, math, spelling. Lessons could be designed to stand alone and might be taught in any order. Lessons and activities would employ a number of different teaching methods to address the needs of a variety of classroom situations. The curriculum would be flexible and creative.

## **RESOURCE STEWARDSHIP**

The natural, cultural, and historic resources of the Delta will serve as the stimulus for heritage tourism development and marketing. These resources must be protected and preserved if the heritage partnership is to meet

its full potential and if future generations will be able to experience and understand the region's rich past.

### **Historic and Cultural Resources.**

Historic and cultural resources provide an important link to the past and are key to understanding the present and future. Many of the Delta's important resources have already been lost through development, neglect, lack of funding and expertise for protection, natural disasters, poverty, and/or lack of recognition of the importance of preserving heritage resources.

Preservation of historic and cultural resources would include resource surveys, historic preservation education programs, development of historic districts and publication of guidelines and manuals. In addition to resource surveys, documentation efforts would include collecting, archiving, and making available oral histories, historic and current photographs and architectural drawings, blue prints, maps, and appropriate artifacts. Education programs would present appropriate treatment and storage of the collection to ensure their preservation for future use. As other important resources are identified, documentation efforts would also include the preparation of national register nominations and the establishment of local ordinance districts.

Cultural landscapes help define and illustrate important physical features in the Delta. Cotton fields, gins, and cotton bales beside the road in Mississippi recall the days of "King Cotton" and illustrate the abiding presence of agriculture in today's economy in the Delta. Many of the Delta's landscapes are changing, however, as development encroaches on those features that recall the region's agricultural and labor heritage. It will be important to work with private landowners and communities to survey and define the important landscape features of the region, nominate appropriate landscapes to the national register, and interpret the changing nature of the landscape.

### **Natural Resources**

The Lower Mississippi Delta provides habitat and ecological support for a wide variety of flora, fauna and aquatic species. The Mississippi river forms the most important bird and waterfowl migration corridor on the continent while the river bottoms comprise North America's largest wetland area and bottom land hardwood forest. Regional tourism and resource strategies should encourage local jurisdictions to be pro-active in creating easements or land management programs to protect and conserve these vital resources.

Opportunities may exist for partnering with one or more landowners and/or public agencies to conserve natural resources in the region. Important activities which might be part of a natural resource stewardship program might include conservation partnerships, open space initiatives, innovative conservation and land management mechanisms, and protection of important roads, capes and scenic view sheds.

### **FACILITY DEVELOPMENT**

This alternative proposes using existing tourist information centers and the development of various media for the dissemination of information to tourists in the Delta. No new facility development is recommended as part of this alternative.

### **MANAGEMENT APPROACH**

#### **Lower Mississippi Delta Heritage Partnership**

Under this management approach, a coalition of State representatives and local and private tourism organizations would form a Lower Mississippi Delta Heritage Partnership to focus on the coordination, planning, funding, implementation and management of heritage tourism efforts in the region. This strategy would also require federal legislation, however, the primary leadership responsibilities would reside at the State level. The primary emphasis would be providing

direction and guiding the development of a comprehensive information and orientation network and a tourism/ economic development/marketing initiative.

### **Membership**

The heritage partnership would be comprised of state tourism representatives, educational institutions, and representatives from local and private sector tourism organizations. The partnership would provide a framework that would bring together existing public and private tourism initiatives and programs and would focus on creating new ones as needed.

Partnership members would be appointed by the governors of each state and would reflect the region's rich cultural diversity and represent a diversity of heritage resources found in the Delta. The partnership's chair position would rotate so that each state would have the opportunity to assume a leadership role within the partnership.

The number of members of the heritage partnership would be approximately 15 to enable the partnership to focus primarily on tourism development and marketing. Leadership responsibilities would reside at the state level. Federal involvement would be provided by ex-officio members of the concerned federal agencies in the Delta. It is suggested that the partnership establish subregional advisory committees for planning and implementing the nine concepts presented earlier.

### **Functions**

The partnership would have a formalized management structure that would define the roles and responsibilities of the different participants and coordinate their efforts. The partnership would have its own executive director and staff skilled in heritage tourism. Federal government staff could be detailed for helping with the planning and implementation of heritage tourism efforts.

The partnership would be responsible for: (1) Preparation and approval of a heritage tourism plan for the lower Mississippi Delta. The plan would focus on defining the desired visitor experience; providing direction for tourism and economic development; outlining an information and orientation network; and defining interpretation and educational opportunities. (2) Coordination of public agencies and private sector heritage tourism initiatives at the state, local, and federal levels. (3) Serving as a central clearinghouse for heritage tourism information and ensuring an adequate flow of information to all segments of the tourism industry in the Delta. (4) Providing technical assistance to communities and other entities interested in heritage tourism development. (5) Developing standards and criteria for signs, heritage tourism development, informational and interpretive media such as brochures, self-guided tours, videos, and wayside exhibits that provide a broad context for the stories of the Delta. (6) Preparing and implementing a 10-year strategic plan.

### **Funding**

The partnership would have the authority, through federal legislation, to receive federal funds. These funds would require a match of in-kind services and/or financial support. Funding would be for planning, set-up, coordination among various entities, and seed money for implementation of projects. It is envisioned that a 10-year strategic plan would be prepared, approved and implemented. The plan would address economic development, marketing approaches that support new tourism products, and the level and funding sources for planning, designing, and implementing the nine concepts presented in this document.

At the conclusion of the initial 10-year period, each state would establish a funding mechanism to provide for participation in the partnership as well as implementation of the strategic plan focusing primarily on heritage tourism. This approach would ensure that the comprehensive effort is self-sustaining and that the staff continue with the partnership's mission.

Funding for implementing the 10-year strategic plan would come from a variety of public and private sources outlined in the economic development portion of the strategic plan.

### **Estimated Costs**

This approach is focused primarily on heritage tourism and working largely at the state and local levels. Federal funding would be provided for a 10-year period at a cost not to exceed \$500,000 per year or \$5 million total. These

funds would be used for staff salaries and office set up, administration, and preparation of a heritage tourism plan and 10-year strategic plan. The states and local levels of government as well as the private sector will provide other sources of funding to implement much of the 10-year strategic plan.